

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 1 - HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPERS

Thursday, 6 September 2018

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Cathrine Russell (Chair) , Councillor Zoe Smith (Deputy Chair), Councillor Sally Beardsworth

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Ian Bates

Witnesses Councillor Stephen Hibbert (Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing),
Councillor Anna King (Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Engagement),
Emma Forbes (Housing Options and Advice Manager)
Vicki Rockall, (Community Safety and Engagement Manager)
and Mr C (who has previously slept rough)

Officers Phil Harris, Head of Housing and Wellbeing
Tracy Tiff, Scrutiny Officer

Member of the Public Dagmar King

Press James Averill, Democracy Reporter

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Birch, G Eales and Meredith.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

3. DEPUTATIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the meeting held on 5 July as a true and accurate record.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

At this point, Emma Forbes introduced 'Mr C' (not his real name) who has 'lived experience' of sleeping rough in Northampton and was keen to share his experience in order to inform the Scrutiny Panel's deliberations and recommendations.

Mr C spoke candidly about his experiences, saying that he used to have a good life but, as a result of his drug use, he had lost his job and his home. He had slept in the woods for about six months and, although he initially enjoyed the freedom of the woods, this soon changed and it started to have a major impact on his mental health.

Mr C was very supportive of the Nightshelter, describing it as a warm, safe, welcoming place where the staff are non-judgemental and the food is good. He has spent a lot of time sleeping rough and has used the Nightshelter twice since it opened.

At the end of his first stay in the Nightshelter, Mr C was helped to move on to supported housing where he stayed for 11 months before becoming homeless again and returning to the Shelter. During his second stay at the Nightshelter, he engaged more effectively with local services and sorted out his medication before being offered a place in Oasis House.

Mr C has been living in Oasis House for around four weeks and helps out at the Hope Centre, for which he is rewarded for his work.

The Scrutiny Panel asked Mr C a series of questions to which he responded as follows:

- He felt he had been failed by JCP (JobcentrePlus) at his health assessment and that, as a consequence, he lost his benefits and supported housing
- He felt there are plenty of places for homeless people to go during the day when the Nightshelter is closed, but they are probably not being promoted well enough. He said that, although there is always somewhere to go, longer opening hours would be useful but would require extra funding. It would be good, for example, if the Bridge Project was open every Sunday because, for homeless people, Sundays are lonely days.
- He felt that he was living on the streets for a reason and he explained that, while he was on the streets, he was sad and very lonely.
- He commended the Street Outreach Workers, saying that they do their utmost to engage with all rough sleepers, including those who do not want to engage.
- He said that, after moving on from the Nightshelter the first time, he was worried he might not receive enough support from the accommodation provider. He said he felt that the lack of support was the main reason why he lost that accommodation.
- He said he is continuing to work with his Key Worker at Oasis House and, as his medication is now stable, he is hopeful that he will be able to move on successfully from Oasis House when he is ready. In the long term, he wants to be a Key Worker.

The Scrutiny Panel thanked Mr C for sharing his thoughts and experiences. He stayed to observe the remainder of the meeting.

The Scrutiny Panel received a collective response from the Cabinet Member for Housing and Wellbeing and the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Engagement.

The Housing Options and Advice Manager and Community Safety Engagement Manager supported the Cabinet Members in their responses. The Housing Options and Advice Manager highlighted salient points in her comprehensive written response.

The Scrutiny Panel made comment, asked questions and heard:

- In response to a query, the Housing Options and Advice Manager said it is essential that all agencies and organisations work together, and share information, in order to achieve the outcomes that everyone has agreed.
- The Housing Options and Advice Manager confirmed that the Council would like to introduce 'Housing First' in Northampton.
- The Scrutiny Panel was provided with an example of how the Street Outreach Workers had managed to help an encampment of rough sleepers in a town centre churchyard to come off the streets. The last two people – a woman and a man – were persuaded to move into temporary accommodation and the Nightshelter, and the Council then cleared the churchyard of the bedding and rubbish left behind.
- The Community Safety Team and the Housing and Wellbeing Service work well together to support homeless people and rough sleepers.
- The Street Outreach Workers undertake regular weekly assessments of everyone who is staying in the Nightshelter.
- There is a need to understand the rationale behind other organisations' approach to people who are homeless or sleeping rough.

Dagmar King (a member of the public) addressed the Scrutiny Panel and raised concerns about a homeless man she had met who had been living on the streets since February 2018, saying that she was saddened that, after six months of waiting, he has still not been told whether or not he is able to move into the Nightshelter.

The Head of Housing and Wellbeing responded to Mrs King's concerns, saying that all Nightshelter referrals are assessed by him and the Housing Options and Advice Manager and that most decisions are made on the same day as the referral. He said that, even when extra enquiries are needed, nobody will wait more than a few days for a decision.

The Deputy Chair said she had a series of supplementary questions relevant to the Review and briefly ran over them. However, due to the constraints on time, it was agreed that she would forward these to the Scrutiny Officer who will arrange for Officers to prepare a written response that can be shared with the Scrutiny Panel.

The Head of Housing and Wellbeing provided a brief update on the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy (published in August 2018) and said that he will prepare a short briefing paper for the next Scrutiny Panel meeting.

The Chair referred to the excellent site visits that had recently taken place; a full briefing note would be provided to the next meeting.

Councillors Hibbert and King were thanked for their address.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

6. RELEVANT PUBLISHED PAPERS

The Scrutiny Panel noted a briefing note around relevant published papers.

AGREED: That the information provided informs the evidence base of this Scrutiny Review.

At this point the Scrutiny Panel watched a TED talk regarding Housing First.

The meeting concluded at 7:55 pm